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SUBJECT: VIETNAM: CASTRO VISITS HANOI - ACCORDING TO A
-- (HASTY) SCRIPT

REFS: Hanoi 264

1. (SBU) SUMMARY. Cuban President Fidel Castro and an entourage of over 100 government and business officials made a "successful" and carefully scripted visit to Hanoi from February 21-23, on his way to the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) summit in Kuala Lumpur. This was Castro's third visit to Vietnam (previous visits were in 1973 and 1995). The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) announced the visit only 24 hours in advance. The visit generated significant press coverage but there did not appear to be much interest among the general public. Castro's visit "cemented bonds" between two traditional friends. "Multi-faceted" bilateral cooperation, especially on the political and economic fronts, appeared to be the main focus; Castro also found time to denounce US policy on Iraq. Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) General Secretary Nong Duc Manh called for an "immediate end" to the Cuban embargo. END SUMMARY.

VISIT A SURPRISE

2. (SBU) The MFA announced on the afternoon of February 20 that Castro would be visiting Hanoi February 21-23. Even by GVN standards, this was exceptionally short notice for a major state visit. Several third country embassy contacts as well as senior UN officials said that they were also surprised by the MFA's announcement. An MFA Americas Desk official who was not directly involved in the visit claimed that the short notice was "not significant." According to the Americas Desk, the visit had been planned for a long time, but the exact timing was in doubt until very recently. Colonel Tran Nhung, International Department Director of the "People's Army" newspaper said that even the GVN's top leadership only knew about the visit three days in advance. Colonel Nhung opined that the main reasons for the short notice were (1) Cuban "obsession" with security and (2) the Cuban government's "typical indecisiveness as reflected by Castro's working style." A contact at the Mexican Embassy suggested that the current Cuban ambassador, who is "very close to Fidel," might have influenced him to stop in Hanoi on his way to the NAM summit.

3. (U) Despite the apparently short notice, the GVN put together a very busy program for Castro, who looked "quite frail" according to press reports. The program included a series of meetings with top officials, including CPV General Secretary Nong Duc Manh; Prime Minister Phan Van Khai; State

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President Tran Duc Luong; and National Assembly Chairman Nguyen Van An. Castro also met with former CPV General Secretaries Do Muoi and Le Kha Phieu; former President Le

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Duc Anh, and General Vo Nguyen Giap, according to press reports. Other events included a cultural performance at the Hanoi Opera House; ceremonies at the Ho Chi Minh mausoleum and Jose Marti statue; a visit to an electronics plant on the outskirts of Hanoi; and a speech to students at the Hanoi Polytechnic University.

DISCUSSION TOPICS

4. (SBU) MFA Latin American Desk officials involved in the Castro visit told Pol FSN they are all "too busy" to discuss the substance, if any, to the visit. However, it appears that Castro's meetings focused mainly exchanging ideas on a number of bilateral issues. One unconfirmed rumor picked up by the embassy is that Castro made a plea to the GVN senior leadership for additional economic assistance due to the dire state of Cuba's economy. (Note: During PM Khai's visit to Cuba in October 2002 (reftel), Vietnam agreed to sell additional rice to Cuba. In 2002, Vietnam exported 125,000 tons of rice to Cuba; the total volume for 2003 is expected to rise to 150,000 tons, apparently on "easy payment" terms. (End Note) According to Colonel Nhung, Castro's meetings with the GVN and CPV leadership included: (1) exchanging views on the NAM summit; (2) discussing Vietnam's views on current issues such as Iraq and North

Korea; and (3) obtaining the GVN's thoughts on how Vietnam's economic renovation policies might be applied to Cuba. While other areas, such as economic cooperation, received some attention, Colonel Nhung said that he "doubted" that those discussions were "more than general;" as far as he knew, there were no concrete bilateral agreements. The bilateral relationship is "strong and established and there are really no outstanding bilateral issues between us, Colonel Nhung claimed.

15. (SBU) According to press reports, both sides would like to improve two-way trade, which amounted to only about USD 48 million in 2002. However, Colonel Nhung said that "substantial improvement" in this sector is "unlikely in the near future" due to the ailing Cuban economy. He opined that the US embargo has "really hurt" Cuba's economy. Indeed, during the visit, CPV General Secretary Manh denounced the US embargo and said that it should "be ended immediately," according to a press report. Le Linh Lan, head of the MFA's Institute of International Relations Institute for International Relations Center for Euro - American Studies said separately that the visit was "mainly symbolic." Lan opined that, while there were "probably a few minor interministerial agreements as well as "some" business contracts, the poor state of Cuba's economy is an overriding factor that limits the possibility of a stronger economic relationship.

IRAQ DISCUSSION - AS EXPECTED

16. (SBU) According to Colonel Nhung and press reports, Castro and Vietnam's leadership discussed Iraq. One press report noted that both sides called for a diplomatic solution based on "respect for Iraq's independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity, in keeping with the UN Charter and international laws." (Comment: This is very much in line with prior GVN statements on the Iraq issue. End Comment) Colonel Nhung claimed that both sides "completely agree" on Iraq; he predicted that the NAM summit will also reflect their "solidarity" concerning Iraq.

VISIT GENERATED LITTLE PUBLIC INTEREST

17. (U) While State-controlled broadcast and print media gave the Castro visit widespread coverage, there appeared little discernable public interest. At the Hanoi Opera House cultural performance on February 22, poloff observed a "crowd" of perhaps 250 people waiting on sidewalks adjacent to the Opera House for Castro's arrival. About 10-15 percent appeared to be tourists from nearby hotels. Two university students said that they "were excited" about the visit because "Fidel is a great friend of Vietnam." The event, attended by many senior diplomats was scheduled to begin at 9:00 PM; however, the guest of honor, preceded by the GVN and CPV leadership and accompanied by what looked like a platoon of very large Cuban security personnel, did not arrive until nearly 10:30. The ambassador of Japan apparently ran out of patience and was seen leaving the venue at about 9:40. Reportedly, a number of senior diplomats chose not to attend the performance due to the last minute invitations. At the February 23 ceremony at the Ho Chi Minh mausoleum, poloff observed perhaps 50 onlookers, (kept at least 250 meters from the mausoleum); at least 20 were PRC tourists on a group tour. Castro's speech at the Hanoi Polytechnic University on February 23 drew a crowd of students and government officials estimated at 3,000, but, according to a press report, many of the attendees were "encouraged" to attend the event. Colonel Nhung attributed the lack of demonstrative public interest to (1) a decline in Cuba's relevancy to Vietnam over the past 15 years and (2) people generally have become more used to "all types of foreign visits."

WHAT'S NEXT?

18. (SBU) Reftel reported that Party Secretary Manh may visit Cuba in 2003. According to press reports, Castro reiterated the invitation and Manh "happily accepted." Colonel Nhung predicted that Manh's visit is "more likely" to take place in 2004 because National Assembly Chairman Nguyen Van An "will probably" visit Cuba in late March or early April in conjunction with his attending the April 6-12 Inter-Parliamentary Union Conference in Santiago, Chile. Following the NAM summit, Castro will visit China. Although not announced in the local press, Castro will also visit Japan on March 1 and 2, according to Japanese emboffs.

COMMENT

19. (SBU) The last minute nature of this visit invites speculation that Castro needed some convincing to visit arguably his oldest friend, despite having visited here only twice since he came to power in 1959. In contrast, another "old friend," Palestine Authority President Yasser Arafat, has visited Vietnam about 20 times. While it seems likely that the close bilateral relationship (as well as the solidarity rhetoric) between two of the five remaining communist countries will continue, we predict that Vietnam will maintain its path of trying to become a more significant player in the mainstream diplomatic community, focusing on oft-stated goals such as WTO accession and a seat on the UN Security Council.

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